Transforming Negative Habit Energies

My dear friends, today is the 6th of August, 1998, and we are in the Upper Hamlet. We are going to speak English.

Today I would like to speak a little bit about Heaven, or Paradise, and Hell. I have been in Paradise, and I have been in Hell also, so I have some experience to share with you. I think if you remember well, you know that you have also been in Paradise, and you have also been in Hell. Hell is hot, and it is difficult.

The Buddha, in one of his former lives, was in Hell. Before he became a Buddha he had suffered a lot in many lives. He made a lot of mistakes, like all of us. He made himself suffer, and he made people around him suffer. Sometimes he made very big mistakes, and that is why in one of his previous lives he was in Hell. There is a collection of stories about the lives of the Buddha, and there are many hundreds of stories like that. These stories are collected under the title *Jataka Tales*. Among these hundreds of stories, I remember one very vividly. I was seven years old, very young, and I read that story about the Buddha, and I was very shocked. But I did not fully understand that story.

The Buddha was in Hell because he had done something wrong, extremely wrong, that caused a lot of suffering to himself and to others. That is why he found himself in Hell. In that life of his, he hit the bottom of suffering, because that Hell was the worst of all Hells. With him there was another man, and together they had to work very hard, under the direction of a soldier who was in charge of Hell. It was dark, it was cold, and at the same time it was very hot. The guard did not seem to have a heart. It did not seem that he knew anything about suffering. He did not know anything about the feelings of other people, so he just beat up the two men in Hell. He was in charge of the two men, and his task was to make them suffer as much as possible.

I think that guard also suffered a lot. It looked like he didn't have any compassion within him. It looked like he didn't have any love in his heart. It looked like he did not have a heart. He behaved like a robber. When looking at him, when listening to him, it did not seem that one could contact a human being, because he was so brutal. He was not sensitive to people's suffering and pain. That is why he was beating the two men in Hell, and making them suffer a lot. And the Buddha was one of these two men in one of his previous lives.

The guard had an instrument with three iron points, and every time he wanted the two men to go ahead, he used this to push them on the back, and of course blood came out of their backs. He did not allow them to relax; he was always pushing and pushing and pushing. He himself also looked like he was being pushed by something behind him. Have you ever felt that kind of pushing behind your back? Even if there was no one behind you, you have felt that you were being pushed and pushed to do things you don't like to do, and to say the things you don't like to say, and in doing that you created a lot of suffering for yourself and the people around you. Maybe there is something behind us that is pushing and pushing. Sometimes we say horrible things, and do horrible things, that we did not want to say or do, yet we were pushed by something from behind. So we said it, and we did it, even if we didn't want to do it. That was what happened to the guard in Hell: he tried to push, because he was being pushed. He caused a lot of damage to the two men. The two men were very cold, very hungry, and he was always pushing and beating them and causing them a lot of problems.

One afternoon, the man who was the Buddha in a former life saw the guard treating his companion so brutally that something in him rose up. He wanted to protest. He knew that if he intervened, if he said anything, if he tried to prevent the guard beating the other person, that he would be beaten himself. But that something was pushing up in him, so that he wanted to intervene, and he wanted to say: "Don't beat him so much. Why don't you allow him to relax? Why do you have to stab him and to beat him and to push him so much?" Deep within the Buddha was a pressure coming up, and he wanted to intervene, even knowing perfectly well that if he did, he would be beaten by the guard. That impulse was very strong in him, and he could not stand it anymore. He turned around, and he faced the guard without any heart, and said, "Why don't you leave him alone for a moment? Why do you keep beating him and pushing him like that? Don't you have a heart?"

That was what he said, this man who was to be the Buddha. When the guard saw him protesting like that, and heard him, he was very angry, and he used his fork, and he planted it right in the chest of the Buddha. As a result, the Buddha died right away, and he was reborn the very same minute into the body of a human being. He escaped Hell, and became a human being living on earth, just because compassion was born in him, strong enough for him to have the courage to intervene to help his fellow man in Hell.

When I read this story, I was astonished, and I came to the conclusion that even in Hell there was compassion. That was a very relieving truth: even in Hell there is compassion. Can you imagine? And wherever compassion is, it's not too bad. Do you know something? The other fellow saw the Buddha die. He was angry, and for the first time he was touched by compassion: the other person must have had some love, some compassion to have the courage to intervene for his sake. That gave rise to some compassion in him also. That is why he looked at the guard, and he said, "My friend was right, you don't have a heart. You can only create suffering for yourself and for other people. I don't think that you are a happy person. You have killed him." And after he said that, the guard was also very angry at him, and he used his fork, and planted the fork in the stomach of the second man, who also died right away, and was reborn as a human being on earth. Both of them escaped Hell, and had a chance to begin anew on earth, as full human beings.

What happened to the guard, the one who had no heart? He felt very lonely, because in that Hell there were only three people and now the other two were dead. He began to see that these two were not very kind, or very nice, but to have people living

with us is a wonderful thing. Now the two other people were dead, and he was alone, utterly alone there. He could not bear that kind of loneliness, and Hell became very difficult for him. Out of that suffering he learned something: he learned that you cannot live alone. Man is not our enemy. You cannot hate man, you cannot kill man, you cannot reduce man to nothingness, because if you kill man, with whom will you live? He made a vow that if he had to take care of other people in Hell, he would learn how to deal with them in a nicer way, and a transformation took place in his heart. In fact, he did have a heart. To believe that he did not have a heart is wrong-everyone has a heart. We need something or someone to touch that heart, to transform it into a human heart. So this time the feeling of loneliness, the desire to be with other humans, was born in him. That is why he decided that if he had to guard other people in Hell, he would know how to deal with them with more compassion. At that time, the door of Hell opened, and a bodhisattva appeared, with all the radiance of a bodhisattva. The bodhisattva said, " Goodness has been born in you, so you don't have to endure Hell very long. You will die quickly and be reborn as a human very soon."

That is the story I read when I was seven. I have to confess that at the time I read it I did not understand it fully. Nevertheless, the story had a strong impact on me. I think that was my favorite Jataka tale. I found that in Hell, there can be compassion. It is possible for us to give birth to compassion even in the most difficult situations. In our daily lives, from time to time, we create Hell for ourselves and for our beloved ones. The Buddha had done that several times before he became a Buddha. He created suffering for himself and for other people, including his mother and his father. That is why, in one of his former lives, he had to be in Hell. Hell is a place where we can learn a lesson in order to grow, and the Buddha learned well in Hell. Do you know what happened after he was reborn as a human? He continued to practice compassion, and from that day on he continued to make progress in the direction of understanding and love, and he has never gone back to Hell again, except when he wanted to go there and help the people who suffer.

I have been in Hell, many kinds of Hell, and I have also noticed that even in Hell compassion is possible. With the practice of Buddhist meditation, you may very well prevent Hell manifesting. And if Hell has manifested, you have ways to transform Hell into something that is much more pleasant. When you get angry, Hell is born. Anger makes you suffer a lot, and not only do you suffer, but the people you love also suffer at the same time. When we don't know how to practice, from time to time we create Hell in our own families. When we went to school, our teachers never helped us to deal with these difficulties. He or she did not teach us how to transform Hell into something better, like Paradise. But when you come to a practice center like Plum Village, the brothers and sisters who live here will be able to tell you how to prevent Hell manifesting. If it happens that Hell is there, what can you do for Hell to be transformed into an atmosphere of calm, of coolness, of joy?

Today I would like the young people to learn more about this practice of transforming Hell into something that is more pleasant. You know that the practices of mindful breathing, of mindful walking, of smiling, are very important. You think that you can walk-of course you can walk. You think that you can breathe-in fact, you breathe every day, all day and all night. You think that you can smile. Yes, but the smile here is a little bit different, the breath here is a little bit different, the walking here is a little bit different. We call it mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful smiling, and if you master these methods of practice, you have instruments to transform Hell into Heaven.

Hell can be created by Father, or Mother, or sister, or brother, or yourself. You have created Hell many times in your family, and every time Hell is there, not only do the other people suffer, but you also suffer. So how to make compassion arise in one of you? I think that is the key of the practice. If among you three or four people, there is one person who has compassion inside, one person who is capable of smiling mindfully, of breathing mindfully, of walking mindfully, she or he can be the savior of the whole family. He or she will play the role of the Buddha in Hell, because compassion is born in him first, and that compassion will be seen and touched by someone else, and someone else. It may be that Hell can be transformed in just one minute or less. It is wonderful!

When you are in school you learn a lot of writing and reading and mathematics and science, and many more things, but you don't learn these kinds of things. I think that the monks and the nuns, the brothers and sisters here at Plum Village, can tell you how to practice in order not to allow Hell to manifest; and when Hell is already there, what to do and what not to do so that Hell will not continue, but will be transformed into something wonderful. Joy and happiness are possible, and if we are able to learn a little bit about the practice of mindfulness, we will be able to make life much more pleasant in our family, and also in school and society.

Tomorrow I will tell you another story. This is the end of your Dharma talk, and when you hear the little bell, please stand up and bow to the Sangha before you go out to continue the Dharma discussion. The topic will be "How to Transform Hell into Heaven." Have a good day!

(Bell)**PART II**

Dear friends, the energy that pushes us to do what we do not want to do, to say what we do not want to say, is called habit energy, the negative habit energy in us. *Vasana* is the word in Sanskrit. (Sounds of Thay writing on the board.) It is very important that we recognize that energy in us. This energy has been transmitted to us by many generations of ancestors, and we continue to cultivate it. It is very powerful. We are intelligent enough to know that if we do this, if we say that, we will cause damage in our relationship. Yet when the time comes, when we find ourselves in that situation, we say it or we do it, even though we know it will be destructive. Why? Because it's stronger than we are, we say. It is pushing us all the time. That is why the practice aims at liberating ourselves from that kind of habit energy.

I remember one day when I was sitting on the bus in India, with a friend, visiting untouchable communities. I was there to help bring Buddhist practice to our friends who belong to the Ambedkar Society. I remembered that one day in Nagpur, five hundred thousand untouchables formally received the Five Mindfulness Trainings, because they wanted to liberate themselves from their situation of being oppressed, and they needed spiritual strength, spiritual practice. But after their leader, Dr.

Ambedkar, died, the movement did not go on with energy. So I tried to come and help.

That friend of mine was sitting on my right on the bus. We went to many states in India to offer days of mindfulness and public lectures and retreats. The landscape was beautiful, with palm trees, temples, buffaloes, rice fields, and I was enjoying what I saw from my window. When I looked at him, I saw that he looked very tense, and was not enjoying it as I did. He was struggling. I said, "My dear friend, there is nothing for your to worry about now. I know that your concern is to make my trip pleasant, and to make me happy, but you know, I am happy right now, so enjoy yourself. Sit back, smile. The landscape is very beautiful." He was very tense. He said, "Okay," and he sat back. But just two minutes later, when I looked back at him, he was as tense as before. He was still struggling, struggling and struggling. He was not capable of letting go of the struggle, that struggle that has been going on for many thousands of years. He was not capable of dwelling in the present moment and touching life deeply in that moment, which was my practice, and still is my practice. He was an untouchable himself. Now he has a family, a beautiful apartment to live in, a good job, and he does not look like an untouchable, but he is still one, because he still carries all the energies, the suffering of all his ancestors in the past many thousands of years. They struggle during the day, they struggle during the night, even in dreams, and they are not capable of letting go and relaxing.

Our ancestors might have been luckier than his, but why do many of us behave very much like him? We do not allow ourselves to be relaxed, to be in the here and the now. Why do we always try to run and run, even when we are having our breakfast, even while having our lunch, while walking, while sitting? There is something pushing us, pulling us, all the time. We are not capable of being free, in order to touch life deeply in this very moment. Your depression, your illness, is an outcome of that kind of behavior, because you have never allowed yourself to be free. You make yourself busy all of your life, you believe that happiness and peace is not possible in the here and the now, that it may be possible in the future. That is why you take all of your energies in order to run there, hoping that someday in the future you will have some happiness or some peace. The Buddha addressed this issue very clearly. He said, "Don't get caught in the past, because the past is gone. Don't get upset about the future, because the future is not yet here. There is only one moment for you to be alive, and that is the present moment. Go back to the present moment and live this moment deeply, and you'll be free."

The Buddha said that living happily in the present moment is something possible: *drsta dharma sukha vihari. Drsta dharma* means the things that are here, that happen in the here and the now. *Sukha* means happiness. *Vihari* means to dwell, to live. Living happily in the present moment is the practice. But how to liberate ourselves in order to really be in the here and the now? Buddhist meditation offers the practice of stopping. Stopping is very important, because we have been running all our lives, and also in all our previous lives. Our ancestors, our grandfather, our grandmother, had been running, and now they continue to run in us. If we don't practice, then our children will carry us and continue to run in the future.

So we have to learn the art of stopping, *L'arret.* The Chinese word for stopping is *zhi* (sounds of writing), and if you go to China you'll see a lot of these signs on the street. It means "Stop." If you are a driver, you have to understand that. That is exactly the word used in the scriptures: stopping. Stop running, stop being pushed by that habit energy. But first of all you have to recognize that there is such an energy in yourself, that is always pushing. Even if you want to stop, it doesn't allow you to stop. At breakfast time, a number of us are capable of enjoying our breakfast, a number of us are capable of being together in the here and the now. Just yesterday I had breakfast with two novice monks. We did not have fancy things, but I looked at the two novices and I said, "It's wonderful that we are having breakfast together. It's a most wonderful thing, a most joyful thing. Do you think that there is something more wonderful than just sitting together and having our breakfast together, one teacher and two novices?" One novice offered me a broad smile. He understood. Not only did he understand my statement, but he understood the reality that happiness was real, because we were capable of being together, recognizing the true presence of each other. In that moment life was real. But many of us, while having our breakfast are not really there. We continue to run. We have a lot of projects, we have a lot of worries, we have a lot of anxieties, and we cannot sit like a Buddha.

The Buddha is always sitting on a lotus flower, very fresh, very stable. If we are capable of sitting in the here and the now, anywhere we sit becomes a lotus flower-whether that is the root of a tree, the grass, a stone bench-any of these things becomes a lotus flower for you to sit on, because you are really sitting, you are really there. Your body and your mind together, you are free from all worries, from all regrets, from all anger. Though each of us during sitting meditation has a cushion, the cushion can be Hell, the cushion can be Heaven, the cushion can be a lotus flower, the cushion can be thorns. Many of us sit on the cushion, but it's like sitting on thorns. We don't know how to enjoy the lotus flower.

A few years ago Mr. Nelson Mandela, the president of South Africa came here, for his first official visit, to meet the French president, and the press asked him what he would like to do the most. He said, "What I want to do the most is just sit down and do nothing. (Laughter.) Since my release from prison I have not had that pleasure, I always have to do something. Therefore my deepest desire is to be allowed to sit down and do nothing." In our Sangha here, there are three youngsters who came from South Africa. One of them has become a monk, and two of them are still lay practitioners. They enjoy the practice, and I usually tell them, "Please, sit for your president. If he cannot sit down, then you have to sit for him. Every day we have three occasions to sit, and if you know the need of your president, and of many people in your country, then you would like to sit for them, and sit in such a way that peace and joy become possible." Sitting is not like hard labor, sitting is the enjoyment of stability, of peace, of dwelling in the present moment. We have to recognize the habit energy every time it manifests. It always dictates our behavior, pushing us to do and say things, so we have to practice mindfulness, in order to recognize it every time it is manifested.

A young man from America came here for the summer retreat about ten years ago. He enjoyed his three weeks of practice in the Upper Hamlet, he enjoyed walking and sitting and breathing and cooking, and so on. One day we organized a ceremony called the Thanksgiving Ceremony. Because we also have our own way of celebrating thanks giving - to our parents who brought us to life, to our teachers who show us the way to live happily in the present moment, to our friends who support us in difficult moments, and to all living beings in the animal, vegetable and mineral realms. That day we practiced being aware of

their existence, and lived in such a way as to be grateful for their support.

That young man was asked by his fellow Americans to go to Ste. Foy la Grande to do some shopping, because each national group had to cook something very special from their country, in order to place it on the collective altar of ancestors. If you were a Chinese person, then you would cook something Chinese, something very special in your country. When he was in the market shopping, suddenly a kind of energy came up, and he suddenly became restless, and hurrying. He lost his peace and his beauty. During the three weeks in the Upper Hamlet he never behaved like that, because he was among his Sangha, and everyone was practicing walking and sitting and doing things in a relaxed way, learning how to live in the present moment. The practice in the Upper Hamlet was strong, and he found himself in a Sangha that was practicing well. That is why he enjoyed that kind of freedom, that kind of stability, that kind of joy. Now he was alone in the market, and suddenly he felt himself rushing, feeling restless, and trying to do things quickly in order to go home to the Upper Hamlet. But because had already been practicing for three full weeks, he was able to recognize what was going on within himself. He had a kind of insight: he saw that that was the habit energy of his mother, because she was always like that, rushing, hurrying, agitated, restless. At the moment when he got this insight, he went back to his in-breath and his out-breath, and he said, "Hello, Mommy!" and that feeling of restlessness and hurrying just disappeared. He knew that he was not surrounded by brothers and sisters of his Sangha, and that alone in Ste. Foy la Grande he had to use his mindful breathing as his Sangha. From that moment on he continued the practice of mindful breathing, and he stayed stable and joyful and peaceful the whole time he was shopping. When he came back here he told us the story.

So that negative habit energy that pushes us may have been cultivated by us during the past many years, but it may also have been transmitted to us by our mother, or our father, or our ancestors. And that is our heritage.

(Bell)

Our joy, our peace, our happiness depend very much on our practice of recognizing and transforming our habit energies. There are positive habit energies that we have to cultivate, there are negative habit energies that we have to recognize, embrace and transform. The energy with which we do these things is mindfulness. Mindfulness is a kind of energy that helps us to be aware of what is going on. Therefore, when the habit energy shows itself, we know right away. "Hello, my little habit energy, I know you are there. I will take good care of you." In recognizing it as it is, you are in control of the situation. You don’t have to fight it; in fact the Buddha does not recommend that you fight it, because that habit energy is you, and you should not fight against yourself. You have to generate the energy of mindfulness, which is also you, and that positive energy will do the work of recognizing and embracing. Every time you embrace your habit energy, you can help it to transform a little bit. The habit energy is a kind of seed within your consciousness, and when it becomes a source of energy, you have to recognize it. You have to bring your mindfulness into the present moment, and you just embrace that negative energy: "Hello, my negative habit energy. I know you are there. I am here for you." After maybe one or two or three minutes, that energy will go back into the form of a seed, in order to re-manifest itself later on. You have to be very alert.

Every time a negative energy is embraced by the energy of mindfulness, it will lose a little bit of its strength as it returns as a seed to the lower level of consciousness. The same thing is true for all other mental formations: your fear, your anguish, your anxiety, and your despair. They exist in us in the form of seeds, and every time one of the seeds is watered, it becomes a zone of energy on the upper level of our consciousness. If you don’t know how to take care of it, it will cause damage, it will push us to do or to say things that will damage us and damage the people we love. Therefore, generating the energy of mindfulness, to recognize it, to embrace it, to take care of it, is the practice. And the practice should be done in a very tender, non-violent way. There should be no fighting, because when you fight, you create damage within yourself. The Buddhist practice is based on the insight of non-duality: you are love, you are mindfulness, but you are also that habit energy within you. To meditate does not mean to transform yourself into a battlefield, the right fighting the wrong, the positive fighting the negative. That’s not Buddhist. That is why, based on the insight of non-duality, the practice should be non-violent. Mindfulness embracing anger is like a mother embracing her child, big sister embracing younger sister. The embrace always brings a positive effect. You can bring relief, and you can cause the negative energy to lose some of its strength, just by embracing it.

(Thay draws on the board.)This circle represents our consciousness, and the lower part is called the store consciousness. In French we usually translate this as *le trefonds*. The upper part is called the mind consciousness, usually translated as *le mental*. In the soil of the store consciousness, many kinds of seeds are stored: the seed of love, the seed of understanding, the seed of forgiveness, the seed of despair, the seed of anger-positive and negative, they are all kept and preserved in the store consciousness. And every time one of these seeds is touched or watered, it will manifest itself up here in the mind consciousness as a zone of energy, "energy number one." That maybe your fear, your jealousy, your despair, your depression.

A practitioner is someone who has the right to suffer, but who does not have the right not to practice. People who are not practitioners allow their pain, sorrow and anguish to overwhelm them, to push them to say and do things they don’t want. We, who consider our selves to be practitioners, have the right to suffer like everyone else, but we don’t have the right not to practice. Therefore, we have to do something, to call on the positive things within our bodies and our consciousness, to take care of our situations. It’s okay to suffer, it’s okay to be angry, but it’s not okay to allow yourself to be flooded with suffering. We know that in our bodies and our consciousness there are positive elements that we can call on for help. We have to mobilize these positive elements to protect ourselves and to take good care of the negative things that are manifesting in us.

What we usually do is to call on the seed of mindfulness here to come up, and manifest also as a zone of energy, which we will call "energy number two". The energy of mindfulness has the capacity of recognizing, embracing, and relieving the suffering, calming and also transforming. In every one of us the seed of mindfulness exists, but if we have not practiced the art of mindful living, then that seed may be very small. We can be mindful, but our mindfulness is rather poor. Of course, when you drive your car, you need your mindfulness. A minimum amount of mindfulness is required for your driving, otherwise you will get into an accident. We know that every one of us has the capacity of being mindful. When you operate a machine, you

need a certain amount of mindfulness, otherwise, *un accident de travail* (an industrial injury). In our relationship with another person, we also need some amount of mindfulness, otherwise we will damage the relationship. We know that all of us have some energy of mindfulness, and that is the kind of energy we need very much to take care of our pain and our sorrow.

Mindfulness is something all of us can do. When you drink some water, and you know that you are drinking water, that is mindfulness. We call it mindfulness of drinking. When you breathe in, and you are aware that you are breathing in, that is mindfulness of breathing, and when you walk, and you know that you are walking, then that is mindfulness of walking. Mindfulness of driving, mindfulness of cooking…you don't need to be in the meditation hall to practice mindfulness. You can be there in the kitchen, or in the garden, as you continue to cultivate the energy of mindfulness. That is the most important practice within a Buddhist practice center: you do everything mindfully, because you need that energy very much, for your transformation and healing. You know you can do it, and you will do it better if you are surrounded by a community of brothers and sisters who are doing the same things as you are. Alone you might forget, and you might abandon your practice after a few days or a few months. But if you live permanently with a Sangha, then you will be supported, and your mindfulness will grow stronger and stronger every day, thanks to the support of the Sangha.

For those of us who practice mindfulness as an art of daily living, the seed of mindfulness in our store consciousness becomes very strong; and any time we touch it, we call on it for help, then it will be ready for us, just like the mother who, although she is working in the kitchen, is always ready for the baby every time the baby cries. So our mindfulness is there so that we may recognize, because mindfulness is defined first of all as the energy that helps us to know what is going on in the present moment. I drink water, I know that I am drinking the water. Drinking the water is what is happening. I walk mindfully, I make steps mindfully, and I know that I am making mindful steps. Mindfulness of walking: I am aware that walking is going on, and I am concentrated in the walking. Mindfulness has the power of bringing concentration. When you drink your water mindfully, you are concentrated on your drinking. If you are concentrated, life is deep, and you can get more joy and stability just by drinking your water mindfully. You can drive mindfully, you can cut your carrots mindfully, and when you do these things mindfully, you feel that you are concentrated. You live deeply each moment of your daily life, and we all know that mindfulness and concentration will bring about the insight that we need.

If you don't stop, if you don't become mindful, if you are not concentrated, then there is no chance that you can get the insight. Buddhist meditation is to stop, to calm yourself, to be concentrated, and to direct your looking deeply into what is there in the here and now. The first element of Buddhist meditation is stopping, and the second element is looking deeply. Stopping means not to run anymore, to be mindful of what is happening in the here and the now. (Sounds of writing.) Mindfulness allows you to be in the here and the now, with body and mind united. In our daily lives, it happens very often that our body is there, but our mind is elsewhere, in the past or the future, or caught in our projects, our fear, our anger. Mindfulness helps bring the mind back to the body, and when you do that you suddenly become truly present in the here and the now. So you can define mindfulness as the energy that helps you to be fully present. If you are fully present, with your mind and body truly together, you suddenly become fully present and fully alive. It is that energy that helps you to be alive and present. You can bring mindfulness to yourself in many ways: by just breathing, by walking, by looking, by cooking, by breakfast-making…because you can use breakfast-making as an exercise to bring body and mind together.

I'd like to define mindfulness as the practice of being there, body and mind united. The practice of being fully present, the practice of being fully alive. You have an appointment with life-you should not miss it. The time and the space of your appointment is the here and the now. If you miss the present moment, if you miss the here and the now, you miss your appointment with life, which is very serious. So learning how to go back to the present moment, to be fully present, to be fully alive, is the beginning of meditation. Since you are there, something else is there also: life. If you are not available to life, then life will not be available to you. When you stand there with a group of people, contemplating the rising moon, you need to be mindful, you need to be in the here and the now. If you allow yourself to get lost in the past or the future, the full moon is not for you, it is for other people who are there. So if you know how to practice mindful breathing, you can bring your mind back to your body, and you can make yourself fully present and fully alive, now the moon will be for you. That is why I said that if you were there, something else would be there also: life.

Mindfulness helps your stopping to be realized. You stop running because you are really there. You stop being carried by your habit energy, by your forgetfulness. And when you touch something beautiful, with mindfulness, that something becomes a refreshing and healing element for you. With mindfulness we can touch the positive things, and we can also touch the negative things. If there is joy, mindfulness allows us to recognize it as joy, and mindfulness helps us to profit from that joy and allows it to grow, and to help us in the work of transformation and healing.

There are elements within us that have not gone wrong. There are elements around us that have not gone wrong. And the first task of meditators is to be able to touch and to recognize these positive elements, because they have the power of nourishing and healing. If you are a psychotherapist, you might like to try this with your clients: instead of talking about what goes wrong, you begin to invite him or her about what does not go wrong with you and around you. Sometimes we are too weak and too sick to embrace only our negative elements. Before a surgery is done, a doctor will examine the patient to see whether that person has enough strength to withstand the surgery. If the person is too weak, the doctor will try, through nutrition and other means, to help the patient's body to strengthen before the operation is done. We so the same thing here. If that person suffers so much, we should not begin by talking about what is wrong.

Our body and our consciousness is like a garden: there may be a number of trees dying in that garden, but that does not mean that the whole garden is dead. Maybe the majority of the trees are still vigorous, beautiful. That is why you should not allow the negative to overwhelm us, because there are still many things that work well within our bodies and our consciousness. The therapist should help his or her client to develop the ability to identify these positive elements within him or her, and around him or her. And the therapist, of course, has to be able to do that for himself or herself, and become a co-practitioner. The

therapist can invite his client for a walking meditation session, and during that session, he will try to put his client in touch with the positive elements within him or around him. In the Buddhist practice this is very important. Mindfulness is the energy we generate, and first of all we want that energy to help us get in touch with the positive things-joy and happiness.

Last week we studied the discourse on the sixteen exercises of mindful breathing, the *Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*, and we saw very clearly that the Buddha was very compassionate. Among the sixteen exercises of mindful breathing, six of them have the purpose of helping us to contact the positive aspects of life within and around us. That is why meditation can be described as food, nourishment for us. Mindfulness is the kind of energy you cultivate with the practice of walking, breathing, sitting, eating, cooking, and so on. We should not waste a minute in our daily lives. We can use every moment of our daily lives to generate more energy of mindfulness.

In Plum Village, when you go to the kitchen, you will see that people in the kitchen are practicing. That group of people knows that today is their turn to cook for the community, and they know that it is possible to make the cooking for the community into a practice, and the motivation is love, the motivation is the willingness to practice. We can begin before starting the work of cooking, they always offer incense, and they do some chanting, so that they will remember that the whole process of cooking is a practice. They don't talk. From time to time they have to communicate in order to coordinate the work, but they do it mindfully.

From time to time I will go to the kitchen, and if I see a monk or a nun or a layperson doing something like cutting carrots, I will stop by and contemplate, and look. I will stay there for a number of seconds, breathing in and breathing out, and my presence close to that person is sometimes very helpful. That person might be losing himself in thinking, but with me standing there, then he will come back to his mindful carrot cutting very quickly. Sometimes I may ask, "My dear friend, what are you doing there?" Usually the monk or the nun or the layperson will look up at me and smile, and that is enough. Because they know that my presence and my question does not necessitate an answer. And if you were to say, "Thay, I am cutting carrots," that would be the worst answer, because I am there, and I see you cutting carrots. You don't have to tell me. My question is, "Are you enjoying it as a practice?" That is why you can answer like this, "Thay, I am doing nothing," or "Thay, I am breathing," or you don't say anything at all and you smile. So the presence of a Dharma brother, the presence of a Dharma sister, is to help you to go back to the here and the now and to enjoy your practice of being mindful. Cutting carrots may be very joyful, breathing also, walking also. While you do these things, you realize stopping. You don't run any more, you are with whatever is there in the present moment. You are wholeheartedly with the carrot.

(Bell)

We should invest one hundred percent of ourselves into the business of carrot cutting. Nothing else. You have to cut the carrot with all of yourself. While cutting the carrot please don't try to think of the Dharma talk, just cut the carrot in the best way that you can, becoming one with the carrot, becoming one with the cutting. Live deeply that moment of carrot cutting. It is as important as the practice of sitting meditation. It is as important as giving a Dharma talk. When you cut the carrot, just cut the carrot with all your being. That is mindfulness. That is to produce your true presence to become fully alive. The practice is not difficult, especially when you are surrounded by a Sangha where everyone is doing the same. You are cutting carrots, he is sweeping the ground in the meditation hall-you are both practicing the same thing. If you can cultivate concentration, and if you can get the insight you need to liberate yourself from suffering, that is because you know how to cut your carrots.

Cleaning the toilet, you have to do it in the same spirit: invest all of yourself into the cleaning, make it into a joyful practice. One thing at a time, do it deeply. The purpose of the practice is to cultivate the energy of mindfulness. The energy of mindfulness will help us to live each moment of our lives deeply, help us stop running, help us touch what is wonderful, refreshing, nourishing and healing in us and around us. There are many wonders of life that are available in the here and the now, and without mindfulness we would neglect them, we would ignore them, we would not know how to profit from them. It is like my eyes. Breathing in, I am aware of my eyes; breathing out, I smile to my eyes. That is an exercise: mindfulness of eyes, smiling to eyes. When you embrace your eyes with your mindfulness you recognize that you have eyes, still in good condition. It is a wonderful thing still to have eyes in good condition. You need only to open them to enter the Paradise of colors and forms. Those of us who have lost our eyesight know what it feels like to live in the dark, and our greatest desire is for someone to be able to restore our capacity to see things. I have lost my Paradise of forms and colors because I have become blind. Now you give me back my eyesight, I feel as though I am in Paradise again, the Paradise of forms and colors. Sit on the grass and just open your eyes. The blue sky is for you. The white clouds are for you, the trees, the children, the grass, and the loving face of your beloved one. Everything is available to you because you have eyes still in good condition. Most of us don't appreciate our eyes because we are not mindful. We may think that everything in us goes wrong, but that is not true. There are millions of things in us that have not gone wrong, yet we only place our attention on what goes wrong. That is not wisdom. Touching the positive is important, and if you cannot do it by yourself, because your practice is not strong yet, then rely on the brothers and sisters to help you do so; or the therapist, like the teacher, can help you to do this. But the therapist, like the teacher, has to be able to do it for herself, for himself, first, in order to be able to help another person to do so.

The orange is sweet. If you eat the orange in forgetfulness, being caught in your anxiety and sorrow, the orange is not really there. But if you bring your mind and body back together, produce your true presence, become fully alive, and begin to peel the orange, you will see that the orange is a miracle. The orange is not something less than a miracle. If mindfulness is there, then sitting there peeling an orange is a wonderful thing. I have conducted orange meditation sessions where we spent half an hour just eating an orange. And if you can bring the elements of stability and freedom and concentration into it, then eating an orange is a very wonderful thing to do. It may be the most important thing to do with your life. Like eating breakfast with your disciples. Peel the orange. Smell it. Look at the orange to see the orange blossoms, and the rain and the sun that have gone through the orange blossoms. The orange tree has taken several months to bring this wonder to you. If you don't have mindfulness, the orange is not something precious; you are not there, really there, so the orange is not really there. When you

are truly there, fully alive, you will become a miracle yourself. In fact, you are no less than a miracle. To be alive, to be still alive, and to be there, is the greatest miracle. But without mindfulness we cannot touch that miracle, and we continue to complain and to complain. If you are there, the orange will be there too, as a miracle, and the contact between you and the orange brings true life. Just put a section of the orange into your mouth, close your mouth mindfully, and with mindfulness feel the juice coming out of the orange. Do you have the time to do so? What are you using your time for? Are we using our time to live, or to worry, or to make plans?

So mindfulness is the energy that helps us to be really there, to touch the wonders of life that are there, for our own nourishment and healing. Of course, there are negative things within in us and around the world. Mindfulness will help us to recognize them as existing, and, embrace them, bringing them some relief. If you continue to look deeply into the nature of your pain, of the pain of the world, insight will come about how that pain has come to be. Insight always liberates us, and there will be no insight if there is no mindfulness and concentration. So mindfulness produces your true presence, produces life, and helps us with nourishment and healing. Mindfulness helps bring relief. Every time we embrace our pain and our sorrow with our mindfulness, we can always bring relief to ourselves.

When the "energy number two" embraces the "energy number one," it begins to penetrate it. With the continued practice of mindful breathing or mindful walking, the energy of mindfulness continues to be there to embrace and take care of the energy of anger or distress. When you cook potatoes, you have to keep the fire under the pot alive for about twenty minutes. The same thing is true with the practice of embracing our pain and anger. You know that the energy of pain and anger need to be attended to, and so mindfulness should continue to be generated as an energy. In a practice center you learn how to maintain that energy alive; continued mindful breathing and continued mindful breathing are among the practices that keep mindfulness alive. With that energy you can continue to embrace your pain and sorrow. It may be that after ten or fifteen minutes your pain and sorrow will go back to your store consciousness a little bit weaker, your habit energy will go back to the store consciousness as a seed, a little bit weaker. The next time it manifests itself again, you will do the same kind of practice, always embracing and looking deeply into it. You don't need to fight it.

PartIII

With our mindfulness we can make things more beautiful. If you are really there, fully present, then the wonders of life will reveal more of themselves to you. The more you are mindful, the more you are concentrated, the wonders of life will continue to unfold, to reveal themselves to you. The enjoyment you have will grow. That beautiful sunrise, that full moon, that orange, all these things will reveal themselves to you fully if you are truly present, if you are truly alive. That is for your nourishment and healing. As for the negative elements, you don't have to know the nature of your pain, your conflict yet. You don't have to do that in the beginning. You only have to recognize the existence of the pain, the sorrow and the conflict in you. You identify it as the pain, the anger, the sorrow, the conflict, and just produce the energy of mindfulness and embrace it. Stay with it, attend to it with all of your tenderness, your kindness, and take good care of your suffering. Don't try to run away. You run a way because you are too afraid. You are too afraid because you have nothing to protect you and to help you. If you know how to enjoy your practice of mindful walking, mindful breathing, mindful tea drinking, then the energy of mindfulness in you is strong enough for you to embrace and recognize that pain and that sorrow. You also have your Sangha, the brothers and sisters in the Dharma are always there to support you. The collective energy of mindfulness is what we experience when we become part of a practicing Sangha. If you know that during the time of your suffering, you already have a friend capable of understanding, a friend who has some solidity and freedom sitting close to you, you will feel much better. You will feel as though you can stand your suffering, you can look at it, you can embrace it, because your friend's energy, his stability, his freedom are elements that can help you to be a little bit more stable, freer, so that you can embrace your own pain. That is why the existence of practitioners close to you is a very important element.

During the first week of our Summer Retreat, I emphasized the fact that we have to create a place where what you touch can be positive, supportive of your practice. You have to create a Sangha also. A Sangha is a community where many people know how to live deeply in the present moment, there are people who know how to smile, how to enjoy walking and sitting, and if you bring yourself to that environment you will feel better right away. You are initiated into the practice, you are supported by the practice of other people, and very soon you can see the process of nourishment and healing begin. I said that the therapist should be an architect, someone who can create an environment for continued practice. Sometimes you can help that person to suffer less, but if you put him or her back in his or her environment, the same thing will happen again and again. That is why creating a Sangha, a space where you can be nourished, where you can be supported for a long time, is very important.

In the Buddhist practice, a good teacher is always a teacher that has a Sangha. A teacher without a Sangha cannot do much. And the Buddha had a good Sangha. He was an excellent Sangha builder. The king of Kosala told the Buddha that every time he saw the Sangha, he had confidence in the Buddha. So the Sangha is a part of the teaching and the practice. It is thanks to the Sangha that transformation and healing become possible. I think that in therapeutic circles, the doctors and the therapists also need a sane and healthy space, and a Sangha of people who are capable of being happy, of enjoying mental health, physical health, so that the person brought into that environment can feel safe, and can feel the process of healing and transformation taking place right away. So the therapist also needs a Sangha, and an environment without that environment and Sangha, he or she cannot go very far.

I would like to offer you an exercise of mindful walking. It is very important. You practice stopping while you are walking. If you are capable of stopping during the time of walking, then you will be able to stop during the time of breakfast eating, toilet cleaning, or breakfast making. Your depression, for instance, will not go away, until you know how to stop. You have lived in such a way that depression has been possible. You have been running all the time, and you have never allowed yourself to rest, to relax, and to go deeply into your daily life. That is why the depression has come to be. Learning how to walk is what you can do now. You can do it in Plum Village, and when you go home, arrange things so that you can do it every day.

Walking in walking meditation is walking just to enjoy walking. You don’t have any desire to arrive anywhere. Walking and not arriving, that is the technique. And you enjoy every step you make. Every step brings you home to the here and the now. Your true home according to this teaching is the here and the now, because only in this moment, in this place, called the here and the now, can life be possible. The address of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas, and the Zip Code, is "here and now." (Laughter.) The address of peace and light is also "here and now." You know where to go; and every in-breath, every out-breath, every step you make should bring you back to that address.

Taking one in-breath, taking one out-breath, you make two steps, two beautiful steps, and with every step you say, "I have arrived." That should not be a statement, that should be a practice. You have to arrive in the here and the now, and make a strong determination to stop and not to run anymore. You have run all your life already, now is the chance to stop. You walk in a way that can introduce you to the Pure Land of Buddha right away, that can introduce you to the Kingdom of God right away. The Pure Land is the Land where you don’t feel the need to run anymore…and with one step you can enter it. Also the Kingdom of God is the kingdom of peace, and when you arrive in the Kingdom of God you don’t feel you have to run anymore, if you feel that you need to run more, then you are not there yet. That is why with one in-breath you practice: "I have arrived, I have arrived" …and please don’t just make the statement, you have to really arrive. Allow yourself to sink deeply into the here and the now, because life is possible only in the present, life is available only in the present moment, and you know that you have the capacity to touch life in the present moment, the here and the now. It is wonderful that you are still alive, it’s wonderful that you are making steps on this beautiful planet, but our daily life does not allow us to touch that at all. It is like the orange, it is like the beautiful sunset, but we do not allow ourselves to be touched by life with all its miracles. So every step you make is to arrive in the here and the now, your true home is here and now, and everywhere you make a step, you find your true home …"I have arrived, I have arrived," and then make two more steps, "I am home, I am home. I have arrived, I have arrived, I am home, I am home."

We have lost our freedom. We have lost our sovereignty. We are not free anymore. We allow ourselves to be pushed and pulled away from the here and the now. Now we have to resist, we have to recover our sovereignty, we have to reclaim our freedom, and we have to walk like a free person on earth. Freedom here is not political freedom, it is freedom from the past, from the future, from our worries and our fear. Be free, and each step like that can help us, can free us. And the Sangha is there, surrounding you and supporting you in making the step. Many of us here are capable of walking like that. Many of us have been trained for five years, seven years, ten years, in order to be able to walk like that. We resist, we don’t allow ourselves to be carried away anymore. We want to be free, because we know that without freedom, no happiness, no peace, will be possible.

Invest one hundred percent of yourself into making that step: "I have arrived. I have arrived." And your foot will become the foot of the Buddha, because the Buddha always walked like that. And by touching the earth with your foot, you produce the miracle of being alive. You make yourself real and the earth real, and such a step is highly nourishing and healing. You are protecting yourself from the habit energy that is always pushing you to run and to get lost. *Je suis chez moi. Je suis arrivee.* The practice should be very strong, determined. Bring all your attention down to the soles of your feet. Don’t stay over here, bring all your attention to the soles of your feet, and touch the earth as though you kiss the earth with your feet. Like the seal of an emperor on a decree, walk as though you imprint your solidity, your freedom, and your peace on the earth. When I look at your footprint I can see the mark of solidity, of freedom, in it. We have to reclaim our liberty. Liberty, emancipation, *Vimukti*, that is the practice-to free ourselves from that negative habit energy.

I have arrived, I am home. This is already an insight. Make the Buddha’s insight into your own insight. It is not an intellectual concept. But you are awake; you get the enlightenment that life is available only in the here and the now. That is why you have made a strong determination to go home. Your true home is in the here and the now. Only that insight can help you to stop running. You practice arriving with every step you make. "I have arrived; I am home." If your freedom is not perfect, if your stability is not perfect, if you are still pulled back and forth by that habit energy, then look at the brothers who are walking in front of you. Feel that the sisters are walking behind you, and on your right a sister, on your left a sister, all of them doing the same thing: bringing the Pure Land, bringing the Kingdom of God into the here and the now, and you will profit from the collective energy of the Sangha. Back home you cannot profit from that, and here there is an opportunity to allow ourselves to be carried by the boat of the Sangha, to be penetrated by the energy of the Sangha, so that we can make the step. And of course we can make it.

"I have arrived, I am home." Repeat breathing in and out and making steps until you are firmly established in the here and the now, recognizing that this is your true home, until you get the feeling that it is wonderful to be in the here and the now. To allow ourselves to run as before would not be wise at all. Then you will use the next sentence, "In the here, in the now." In fact it is the same thing. Different words, but the same thing. That home is called here and now. When you breathe in, "I am in the here, in the here." And breathing out, "In the now, in the now." Again, the words should not be an obstacle, the words should only help you concentrate and to keep your insight alive. It is the insight that keeps you home, not the words. So please don’t be satisfied with words. It is like the bell: everyone hears the bell, but for a number of us, when we hear the bell we hear the voice that is deep within ourselves; and when we hear that bell, we make peace, stopping, joy and freedom possible. The words are like the sound of the bell; they should be able to produce the insight, the stability and the freedom that we need so much.

You may like to enjoy "I have arrived, I am home," for a few minutes, and when you thing that you are good at it, you may move to the next line, "In the here, in the now." And then: "I am solid, I am free." This is not autosuggestion; if you have succeeded in arriving at home, dwelling really in the here and the now, you already have the elements of solidity and freedom, which are the foundation of your happiness. The Buddha said that the two characteristics of Nirvana are solidity and freedom. Imagine someone who has no solidity, no freedom. That person can never be happy. So walking like that is to cultivate freedom and solidity, which will bring us well being and happiness.

The last is: "In the Ultimate, I dwell." This sentence requires a little bit of explanation. You have heard, of course, of the two dimensions of reality, the Ultimate dimension and the historical dimension. To represent the two dimensions of reality, we may use the images of the wave, and water. Looking at the dimension of the wave, the historical dimension, we see that the wave seems to have a beginning and an end; the wave can be high or low compared to other waves; the wave might be more or less beautiful than the other waves; the wave might be there or not there; it might be there now, but later not there. All these notions are there when we first touch the historical dimension: birth and death, being and non-being, high and low, coming and going, and so on. But we know that when we touch the wave more deeply, we will touch the water. The water is the other dimension of the wave. It is called the Ultimate dimension.

We know that in the historical dimension we can talk in terms of life, death, being, non-being, high, low, coming, going, but in the Ultimate dimension, all these notions are removed. If the wave is capable of touching the water within herself, and if the wave can live the life of water at the same time, then she will not be afraid of all these notions: beginning and ending, birth and death, being or non-being; and she will get the solidity and joy brought to her by non-fear. Her true nature is the nature of no-birth and no-death, no beginning and no end. That is the nature of water. All of us are like that wave. We have our historical dimension. We believe that we begin to be at a certain point of time, and that we will cease to be at a certain point of time. We believe that we are now existing, and that before our birth we did not exist. All these kinds of notions, we get caught into these notions, and that is why we have fear, we have jealousy, we have craving, we have all these kinds of conflicts and afflictions within us. Now if we are capable of arriving, of being more solid and free, it will be possible for us to touch our true nature, the Ultimate dimension of ourselves. In touching that Ultimate dimension, we really get free from all these notions that have made us suffer a lot. This will be made clearer later on. For the time being just enjoy making steps with these two words.

PartIV

In the French version of the poem, we have something different: *«Je prends refuge en moi-meme. Dans la Terre Pure, je m'etablis.»* We can translate this into English as: "I take refuge within myself. In the Pure Land I dwell." If you walk like this, you are already in the Pure Land; you are already in the Kingdom of God. I have been in crowds of two or three thousand people practicing walking meditation together. It is very powerful. Everybody just makes one step, wholly concentrated. It is wonderful: the energy is very powerful. During the time of walking, we don't think of anything, we don't speak, we just touch the earth mindfully and deeply. There are those of us who don't need these words in order to be able to concentrate, but it is very helpful to make use of these words in the beginning of the practice. They help us to be concentrated, to be in the here and the now.

It is good to begin your practice of walking meditation with the Sangha, to get the support. Please arrange it so that during your day you have many chances to do it alone. You can ask a friend to go with you, or you can even take the hand of a child and walk with him or her. In Plum Village many of us begin by signing a contract with a staircase: that is, you make a vow that you will always go up or down that staircase very mindfully, with very solid steps. If it happens that halfway up you realize that one of your steps has not been very solid, you will go down, and begin again. And if you succeed in that, then wherever you go you will be able to dwell in the present moment. You can sign a contract with a particular distance separating your tent and a certain tree, perhaps three or four meters, and you make a vow that when you walk that distance that every step will be solid and mindful, otherwise you will go back and do it again. It is a wonderful way to learn how to live every moment of your daily life deeply, resisting being carried away by your habit energy. Let us try, now, after the Dharma talk, walking together in that spirit. Use your feet to walk, don't use your brain. Use your feet and walk. Walk in such a way as to make the Pure Land available here and now. Walk in such a way that joy and life are possible right here and right now.

(Three bells)

(End of Dharma talk)